

Working Up the Nerve To Have a Timber Harvest



by Kirk Dahl

Sooner or later, most woodland owners start weighing the idea of a timber harvest. Such thoughts may be based upon a professional forester's recommendation, a mandatory practice dictated by a management plan, or some particular aspect of the owner's goals and preferences for the land. But let's face it, if you are a woodland owner, you like being in the woods, and you probably are not entirely thrilled with the idea of cutting any trees.

I'm with you on that, and yet after navigating through 11 different logging operations on my land over the past 34 years, my heart and soul still permit me to say that logging, overall, has been a good thing for me and my woodlands.



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First, it is important to recognize that a timber harvest is not for everyone. The decision to harvest timber, either by doing it yourself or under contract with someone else, is an important one, both for you and for the future of your property. As soon as your trees go from vertical to horizontal, the residual landscape is changed for decades, in terms

of its appearance, uses, perceived value, income potential, type of wildlife habitat and other parameters. You don't want to make a decision that you deem easily susceptible to irreversibly bad consequences and misgivings. "Oops" is not a good word to be thinking while sulking through a field of stumps.

There is considerable help available to you in terms of identifying what is best for your forest. The WI DNR, consulting foresters, books, conferences, the Internet, WWOA and the experiences of other landowners can help you sort that out. If, when, and how to log your woodlands depends in large measure upon what you have for trees. Aspen stands are managed differently than other hardwoods, which are managed differently than pine, etc. The species and age mix, tree stand density (basal surface area), soil types, sun exposure and other factors need to be considered. Get professional help when you can, even if you know quite a bit about forestry.

One of the major considerations is your management plan. Everything, really, rides on what you want to do with



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your land. Electively cutting timber in an effort to practice so-called “sound forestry” may make perfect sense for some objectives like maximizing profit or converting the forest to a different species, but it may make no sense at all if the objective is to maintain a certain habitat or aesthetic appeal. Good stewardship depends in part upon what it is you are trying to be a good steward of. Be sure your personal preferences are on board with your action plan.

Here is my own personal take on the good, bad, and ugly of logging.

First, the good. I like it when logging is going on. I find it interesting and gratifying. For perhaps weeks and weeks, there are big snarly trucks and equipment in the woods, and I’m part of something transformative. Bring your friends out for a look, and get some pictures of you standing on the landing near several semi loads of handsome timber.

Predictable positive results include the renewed vigor of the residual stand, perhaps the growth of new tree species, and an entirely different or reinvigorated wildlife habitat.

Never underestimate the fun and importance of depositing the stumpage checks in the bank. You may not be trying to squeeze every nickel out of your woods, but putting money in the bank is part of the overall investment package making private woodland ownership desirable and possible. Suffice it to say that over a lengthy period of time, timber harvests can generate some substantial sums of money, and they may even pay for the property. Plus, money in the bank is not susceptible to fire, weather, or disease the way trees are. Cash is a bird in the hand.

When we had a hardwood logging operation recently, there were tree tops and logging slash all over the place. But figuring into my decision to harvest was the easy access to firewood that resulted from this. My goal was to cut 20 pick-up loads of firewood in the process of cleaning up. I ended up with 31 loads, and that was just from the easy pickings near the roads.

There may also be some secondary unanticipated benefits to logging. In my case, the loggers widened and smoothed some of my roads, including



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plowing up some undesirable stumps, in order to get the 18-wheeler semi trucks way back there. I nicknamed one of those roads “Interstate 94” because it is so drivable now. Roads can become heavily rutted during logging, so be sure to have a road restoration clause in your logging contract. Also, since loggers drive huge skidders and forwarders through the woods, new roads are cre-

ated, albeit pretty rough ones. You can get those smoothed out and maintain them as permanent new roads if you so choose. Furthermore, in the case of a clearcut, there are suddenly no trees left to drop branches or fall as windthrow, so road maintenance is consequently easier from then on.

Finally, a large-scale timber harvest creates new views. Until the next crop



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of trees grows above the line-of-sight, you may be blessed with delightful new views extending off a ridgetop or through a valley, putting a positive spin on the net results.

On the negative side, the appearance of your land will change dramatically. You probably will not think the same way about your land or interact with it in quite the same way ever again. If you are just thinning, you will still be stunned at the difference, but if you clearcut, stand by for a shock. To avoid deep and irreversible disappointment, be sure to visit a logging site or two before you sign the dotted line. Once the trees are cut, the resulting long-term appearance may be what was desired and may be better, but regardless, it will be profoundly different.

There are valid arguments against clear-cutting, or even any cutting. Included are damage to any residual stand, habitat destruction, possible increased exposure to the spread of pests and disease, soil compaction, erosion issues, aesthetics, complaints from neighbors and other factors. Try to understand the negatives as they apply to your individual situation. Nothing in life is either all good or all bad.

The ugly part of harvesting timber is pretty obvious. It can look as though a bomb exploded there. There are tree limbs, piles of branches, stumps, and

rutted roads everywhere. Be prepared to gulp a time or two, but then move on. Clean up some of it if you want. The most effective areas to clean up are along your trails and roads where you are most likely to see logging debris, and fortunately that is right where you have the best access from which you can pick up firewood if you choose.

Even when large limbs and slash are left on the ground in a tangled heap, all of that begins to slump down right away and soon gets obscured by new undergrowth. Additionally, those brush piles make good wildlife cover. Stumps can take literally decades to fully decompose but should generally be left alone, especially, of course, when stump regeneration, or sprouting from the residual stumps, is desired. In a few years, you likely will be rewarded with a rich assortment of wildlife and saplings. So from the long-term perspectives of forestry, soon all may be forgiven.

My experiences have generally been good, but there have been problems along the way. One time I put flagging tape around the best trees in a small area, identifying them so as to preserve them, but the logger misunderstood and cut only those best trees. Another time the crew brought tents and asked if they could camp out on my land instead of driving home at night. It wasn't the ideal situation, but I let them proceed.

The worst of it was when I ran into trouble getting the logger to complete the job. In thinning an overly dense red pine plantation one winter, the branches in the crowns were pretty much frozen together, and men cutting "by hand" with chain saws could not pull the trees down. They had to quit right in the middle of the operation.

Another time, my consulting forester marked the trees but forgot to mark a two-acre stand in a remote corner, and thus the logger did not cut those before pulling his equipment off site. In my most recent hardwood clearcut, the logger asked for a contract extension when the work did not get finished on time, and then he never did come back anyway, citing a depressed timber market. This creates a problem for me, as it will be difficult to interest another logger in what now remains as just a small project.

To save yourself some stress during the process, however, plan to cut your crew some slack. Logging is among the most dangerous of occupations, and it is hard work in often adverse and unpredictable weather and amidst frequent equipment breakdowns. The crews may make mistakes and the unexpected will happen. Don't accept careless work, but anticipate occasional issues. If I were doing the work myself, I'd accidentally create problems, too.

If and when you are ready to proceed, there is plenty else to think about, including marking trees and boundaries, bids, timing, tax implications and so on. Get competent help in the areas where you need it. A good discussion of what to consider, and a sample timber sale contract, are available on the WWOA website by clicking on "What We Do" and then "Resources." Timber markets wax and wane, and like the stock market, you cannot expect to time your sale to perfectly match peaks in the market.

Give it your best shot, and enjoy the journey. Life is full of adventures, and a timber harvest certainly qualifies as one of them.

Kirk Dahl is a lifetime member of WWOA and has been a woodland owner since 1982. He was founder of the Chippewa Valley Chapter of WWOA in 1987 and hosted the field day for the 2011 WWOA Annual Meeting. He resides in Eau Claire.